
Telling Tilli's Tale

Lorna Beck Collier, '83

Freelance writer Lorna Beck Collier has penned many poignant articles in her 20-year career, but none had touched her heart or sparked her imagination as much as sharing the inspirational story of an Illinois woman right from her own backyard.

Remembering back to their initial meeting in 1994, Collier admits that she didn't realize what she was getting into when she agreed to write Tilli Schulze's autobiography. Of course the 1983 NIU English graduate recognized that Schulze indeed had quite a remarkable tale to tell—one that involved unimaginable sacrifices and a daring solo escape to freedom in America. But she never imagined the project would take on a life of its own, emerging from a folder fat with publishers' rejection letters to enjoying rave reviews and a pending movie deal.

"The success of Tilli's story has hit like a bombshell," Collier says. "Between signings, readings, and other engagements, I've had little time for other projects. But it's worth it—this book is very close to my heart."

Considering the unique circumstances that led them to cross paths, it seemed only fitting that Collier would be the one to translate Schulze's memories onto paper. Enlisting the assistance from a friend at the *Rockford Register Star*, Schulze was put in touch with Collier, a former reporter at the newspaper, who as it turns out, once lived behind Schulze as a young girl. Schulze remembered Collier as a "bookworm" who always had her nose in a book, so she wasn't the least bit surprised to see that Collier had become a writer. The coincidence sealed the deal, and Schulze hired Collier to write her autobiography. That day would begin a profound friendship and chapter in their lives.

For the first two years, Schulze shared her stories with Collier, recounting torrid memories of her childhood in East Germany during World War II and the subsequent occupation of the Soviet regime that continued to haunt her dreams. At 16, she escaped from behind the Iron Curtain by hiding in the bottom of a potato cart, leaving behind her family and the life she knew in hopes for freedom and a brighter future in America. As Collier became enraptured with the story, she realized that this

was much more than an autobiography—Schulze had life lessons to share, and Collier became her voice. Titled *Tilli's Story: My Thoughts are Free*, the book takes its namesake from a German folksong that Schulze's mother would hum to ease tense moments.

"First and foremost, Tilli's story is an ode to freedom," explains Collier. "Her story truly touched me, as she came through the obstacles without being bitter. Tilli's story shows that

no matter how bad life can get, it is possible to maintain a positive attitude and still be able to smile in the end."

Once the manuscript was complete, they shopped it around to numerous publishers, facing rejection each time with such excuses as an oversaturation of World War II stories in the market to lack of interest in a memoir from a "noncelebrity." However, Schulze's determination inspired Collier to continue pushing forward.

As Schulze became ill with a kidney disease, time was of the essence. The duo decided to shoulder the financial risk and produce the book through online print-on-demand publisher iUniverse. Incidentally, the first bound copy arrived in 2004 on the same day Schulze received a life-saving kidney transplant.

In order to spread Schulze's story, the pair made another risky decision to print extensive excerpts of the book in the local newspaper, the *Rockford Register Star*.

"Excerpting the book in the newspaper was a big roll of the dice—we wondered if we were crazy to give it away. But actually it was the best thing we could have done, as it gave people an entry into the book," notes Collier.

To their surprise, local book sales increased and they received requests for appearances and signings.

Through yet another serendipitous connection, *Tilli's Story: My Thoughts are Free* landed on the desk of Hollywood producer Kathryn Lekan, known for her HBO series *Deadwood*. Collier and Schulze recently signed the book's rights to Lekan, who is working with an independent filmmaker with ties to Germany to possibly produce the movie for the film festival scene.

For more information on the book and its authors, visit www.mythoughtsarefree.com.

